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Tuer, Dot

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Photographing the Lost Mural of Diego Rivera

BY DOT TUER POSTED JULY 9, 2013



Untitled, Juan Guzmán (born Hans Gutmann Guster, Cologne, 1911, died 1982, Mexico City).
Frida and Diego posing for Diego Rivera's Mural:
"The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace" in
the Palacio de Bellas Artes, México 1952. Courtesy
of Throckmorton Fine Art Inc.

Juan Guzmán, a German-born photographer who came to Mexico as a Spanish Civil War refugee in 1939, took a number of photographs of the artist Frida Kahlo in the early 1950s. In this one, Kahlo is accompanied by her husband, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who is at work on a large-scale painting in the Museum of Fine Arts in Mexico City. Measuring 40 feet in length and 10 feet in height, the painting was commissioned by the museum's director, Carlos Chávez, for a state-sponsored exhibition of Mexican art in Paris. Guzmán's photograph documents the central narrative of the painting, which features martyred workers, a menacing mushroom cloud, American soldiers firing into the abyss of battle, and Kahlo collecting signatures for the Stockholm Appeal, a petition initiated by the French Communist physicist Frédéric Joliot Curie in 1950 calling for a ban on nuclear weapons. What the photograph occludes from view is a section to the left of the crucified workers, in which towering portraits of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung proffer peace in the form of pen and petition to Uncle Sam and two figures representing France and Britain.

When Guzmán framed his portrait of Kahlo against the partial backdrop of Rivera's painting he could not have known that his photograph would become the only documentary record of Rivera's mural-sized work, which went missing after a controversy erupted over its political message. Although Rivera wrote, somewhat disingenuously, in his autobiography *My Art, My Life*, that his intention was to

“show the movement for peace which could end the threat of a third World War,” the association of this threat with the geopolitics of the Korean War (1950-53) was unavoidable. The benevolent gestures of Mao and Stalin placed adjacent to American soldiers pointing their guns into an atomic landscape also made clear who the aggressor threatening world peace was: the United States. For the Mexican state, the offence that the painting’s political stance posed to its European allies overrode Rivera’s stature as Mexico’s most famous artist. Before the painting was finished, Chávez ordered it removed from the museum and excluded from the exhibition.

Ever prone to fabulation, Rivera describes in *My Art, My Life* how Chávez’s decision precipitated a national scandal, replete with state troupers purloining the painting from the museum to a secret location, and fierce denunciations by Rivera resulting in the painting’s return to the artist. Whether Chávez sought to “disappear” the painting at the time of its making is a matter of dispute. How the painting went missing in the aftermath of the scandal remains cloaked in mystery. Although Rivera states in his autobiography that China acquired the painting, he does not explain how or why this transpired, and his claim was never taken seriously. Rumours that it ended up in Moscow seemed more probable, as Rivera had travelled there in the mid-1950s. Half a century later, a Chinese art expert, Xing Xiaosheng, rekindled speculation that its final destination was indeed China, stating in an interview published in the Mexican newspaper *Reforma* in 2004 that Rivera made a secret Cold War-era visit to China (presumably during the six-month period he spent in Russia in 1955-56) to give the painting to Mao, who subsequently ordered it destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Despite inquiries made by Mexico to Russia and China concerning the whereabouts of the painting, its fate is still unknown. Whether the painting was destroyed in China or still languishes, as some believe, in a dusty storage room in Moscow, what is certain is that the only extant documentation of Rivera’s monumental homage to Cold War tensions remains encapsulated in Guzmán’s photograph. That what we see in the photograph is a partial view of the painting begs the question of whether Guzmán, too, was caught up in the intrigue of Cold War politics, for he portrays Kahlo and Rivera without the iconic portraits of Stalin and Mao--whose personality cult underpinned the artists’ Communist convictions--towering above them.